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# Features, Characteristics and Cultural and Economic Contribution of Arts and Handicrafts





# Islamic Ornamentation: Reflections on its Humanistic, Cosmological, and Metaphysical Aspects

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Ornamentation is one of the main aesthetic features of Muslim arts and creativity. The tendency to decorate buildings and objects is not limited to Islamic arts and handicrafts, but is universal; modernism is alone in seeking to exclude ornamentation or to minimize the importance of decoration.<sup>1</sup> In Islamic arts and handicrafts ornament is far from being a superficial element: it is on the contrary a vital dimension of an object or a building, not "like jewels or pretty dresses which merely decorate the body", but rather like "the very flesh and skin which cover the skeleton and give it shape, substance, and a pleasing form".<sup>2</sup>

This paper will not deal with the social, cultural, political or economic meanings of ornament, nor will it enter into the complex contemporary debate over the question of symbolism in Islamic ornamentation.<sup>3</sup> Its purpose is rather to shed light on three generic aspects of geometric and vegetal ornamentation in Islamic contexts: humanistic, cosmological, and philosophical.

## Ornament: a humanistic re-creation of nature

From the perspective of Islamic anthropology, ornamentation may be said to reveal or express the central role of Man, whose vocation is to thrive according to his specific function and destiny. The human dimension of ornamentation presents two aspects: the function of man according to Islamic spirituality on the one hand, and the specificity of human interpretation of the natural world on the other.

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<sup>1</sup> James Trilling, *Ornament. A Modern Perspective*, Seattle and London, University of Washington Press, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Ehsan Yar-Shater, "Affinities between Persian Poetry and Music", in Peter J. Chelkowski (ed.), *Studies in Art and Literature of the Near East*, New York, Middle East Center / New York University Press, p. 74.

<sup>3</sup> On some debates between the traditionalist (Titus Burckhard, Frithjof Schuon, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Jean-Louis Michon, among others) and the academic interpretations of Islamic arts, see Patrick Ringgenberg, *Les théories de l'art dans la pensée traditionnelle*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2011, pp. 420-426 and 583-661.



**Man and Islam:** According to the Holy Qur'an, man is the vice-regent or caliph of God on earth (Qur'an 2:30), despite the fact that he is a weak and changeable creature made out of clay (Qur'an 38:71-72). If Man is utterly dependent on God, he nonetheless holds a privileged, unique and central position in the universe, having received the Divine gifts of creativity and of corporal, intellectual and spiritual knowledge of the cosmos. The angels were ordered by God to bow down to Adam, because God taught Adam the names of the things and thus gave him a knowledge that angels do not share (Qur'an 2:30-31). To create and decorate artifacts and buildings corresponds, then, to the human vocation to inhabit the earth and to use, in an adequate way, the specific and unique talents capacities that Man has received from God.

Ornamentation appears also appropriate for Muslims, from the perspective of Islamic spirituality and in the context of a Muslim society. The social, psychological, and artistic contexts in which ornamentation is created, emphasizing transmission rather than individualism, fit with the Qur'anic and traditional conception of Man. Artists and craftsmen must not try to create idols, or glorify themselves in the arts. From this vantage point, ornamentation, as an aesthetic, a technique, a way of life, and a social paradigm, allows artists and craftsmen to be at the right place within society and in their relationship with God. The creation of decoration, in as much it rests on the living transmission of patterns rather than on a continuous individualistic "reaction" of new designs, does not require necessarily a special genius (as expected in the anthropocentric post-medieval European art) and does not rely on a "supernatural" and "(neo)-platonian" inspiration, but demands rather a skilled and imaginative mind. Neither is decoration the expression of a creative passion that can blind and lead the artist to adore himself in the mirror of his works, but rather a method of creating (with talent or genius) in harmony with a religious practice and a mystical spirituality that can, in addition, contribute to develop technical skills as well as social and ethic qualities. Moreover, ornamentation in itself cannot be idolized, since it is not an "art for art's sake" and, however important it is, it remains optional, occasional, ephemeral, dependent, as all arts. On given circumstances (whether cultural, economic, and political). In short, the nature of ornamentation and the cultural and psychological conditions of its creation reflects a certain image of human beings promoted by Islamic spirituality. We can call it the "spiritual humanism of decoration": the ornament is created by men for men, and far from isolating men from society and taking them away from God, it allows them to blossom in the frame of their human dignity, social network, and metaphysical vocation.

**Man and Nature:** The aesthetics of ornamentation implies a cultural transformation of motifs – mainly vegetal – found in nature. Man does not simply imitate the natural world, but recreates in his arts, and according to a certain cultural context, aesthetic orientation, technical and material situation, the shape of a tree or the design of a flower. In the Ottoman State (ill. 1), Safavid Iran or Mughal India, vegetal motifs in decoration display a more pronounced naturalism than in other Islamic contexts (in North Africa, for instance), but they nevertheless display stylization (geometry, flatness, symmetry, color regularity and saturation, etc.), and are thus clearly distinct from their models in the natural world. This cultural recreation of natural vegetal elements corresponds to the specificity and vocation of human intelligence and creative





1. Rüstem Pasha mosque, Istanbul, ca. 1561-1563.  
Photograph: Patrick Ringgenberg [2004]



2. Tuman Aga mausoleum in Shāh-i Zinda  
necropolis, Samarqand, 1405, Photograph:  
Patrick Ringgenberg. [2001-2004],

capacities. By interpreting in art what he sees in nature, or by inventing patterns and designs more or less inspired from the natural world.

The central role of human consciousness is even more obvious in the geometry of ornament (*ill.* 2). With the exception of geometric structures that can be seen only with modern microscopes, observable geometric elements are rare in nature.<sup>4</sup> The development of geometric patterns in Islamic decoration is not then the result of the observation of nature, but is mainly due to the technical and creative processes used by craftsmen – many of them inherited from pre-Islamic civilizations –, the development of mathematical sciences, or to Pythagorean and Platonic speculations that may have inspired a symbolic use of geometry and numbers.<sup>5</sup> The geometrization of pattern and decoration is obviously typical of human consciousness, as it involves a power of intellection and abstraction proper to the human species.

In brief, the use of geometry as well as the stylization of nature in decorative patterns is clear signs of Man's central function within the cosmic order and hierarchy.

<sup>4</sup> Ernst Gombrich, *The Sense of Order. A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art*, London, Phaidon, 1984, p. 7.

<sup>5</sup> The bibliography on geometric ornament is considerable, but Gülru Necipoğlu's book devoted to one of the oldest craftsmen's scroll is one of the major studies published these past two decades (*The Topkapı Scroll: Geometry and Ornament in Islamic Architecture*, Santa Monica, The Getty Centre for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1995).





3. Night sky Photograph: Robert Knapp [Wikimedia Commons: CC-BY-SA-3.0]



4. Cupola, Friday Mosque, Yazd, 14th Century, Photograph: Patrick Ringgenberg [2009]





5. Ardabil Carpet, Iran, 1539-40, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, Source of photograph: Wikimedia Commons [PD-Art (PD-old-100)]

## The cosmology of ornamentation

According to the Qur'an, God adorned the sky with stars (Qur'an 37:6) and the earth with vegetation (Qur'an 18: 7-8). God is the Supreme Artist, who created and adorned His creation, and the ornate universe is a prototype and a primary source of inspiration for human artistic ornamentation. Of the relationship between the human art of decoration and the Divine cosmic ornamentation one can distinguish three main aspects:

1. Craftsmen adorn buildings, objects, or textiles, inspired to a certain extent by the inimitable model of God decorating the sky and the earth. The "handmade" ornamentation, using geometric and vegetal motifs, constitutes a human mirror to a divinely adorned cosmos (*ill.* 3 /4). When decorating and thus giving beauty to an object or to a building, men continue in a certain sense – or rather echo- the embellishment of the universe and the "decorative" work of the Divine Creator.
2. The harmony of human decorations may be interpreted as a metaphor of the harmony of the world and as an attempt to harmonize, in visual terms, human existence in general and Muslim society in particular with the natural and metaphysical worlds. Carpets offer good examples in this regard. Displaying in a structured order geometric patterns and geometrized vegetal motifs, carpets (*ill.* 5) are miniaturizations of a garden, of paradise, of a kingdom (hunting carpets), of a mosque (prayer carpet), and thus they reproduce on a space and in a size adapted to men the "holistic" concept of a harmonic and symbolic universe. In a more general way, a decoration – whether on a wall, a cloth, or a plate – expresses order: thanks to its regular patterns and aesthetic principles (predominance of geometry, repetition, subdivision, ...) it provides a sense of organization, structure, stability, regularity, which attunes to the very structure of the universe,





The divine Unity, at the center of all reality, creates.

The universe, as a radiant mirror and mosaic of His Infinity, Names, and Beauty.

6 – A hermeneutic of a geometric pattern: for a mystic or a Neo-Platonist philosopher, the center may symbolize the Divine Unity and the circumference the universe, composed with a hierarchy of multiple worlds and levels, radiating from God's Intellect. Ulugh Beg Madrasa, Samarqand, 1417-21, Photograph: Patrick Ringgenberg [2006]

determined by natural laws and a geometric constancy.<sup>6</sup>

3. Decoration is or may be interpreted as a symbolic or schematic representation of a cosmology. Ornate objects and architectures, like cupolas, cups, candlesticks, carpets or boxes, clearly offer the miniaturization of a worldview (*Weltanschauung*) and a symbolic paradigm.<sup>7</sup> The ornamentation in many cupolas is a clear evocation of the celestial vault (*ill.* 4) and this ornamentation may be interpreted on different levels, astrological and cosmological as well as metaphysical or mystical. Some decorative motifs such as rosettes, medallions and *shamse*, may even symbolize a cosmology or constitute a visual support for mystical and philosophical interpretations. That is not to say that these patterns were conceived as “mandalas”, although their general structure (a center surrounded by polygons) is very similar to mandalas, but their visuality offers a hermeneutic potential for any interpretation – cosmological, theological, philosophical – using concentric and/or radiating diagrams (*ill.* 6 / 8).

### A metaphysical hermeneutic of ornamentation

On a more speculative level, the sense of ornamentation in Islamic arts may also be interpreted from a philosophical perspective. The concept of an ornate world stems from the Qur'an and allows us to propose an overall metaphysical interpretation of the very concept of “ornament”.

<sup>6</sup> Many Qur'anic verses evoke indeed the regularity of the universe (the course of the moon and the sun: Qur'an 55:5), the necessity of justice and balance (Qur'an 55:7-9), a sense of proportion (the burden is adapted to each soul: Qur'an 2:233). See Patrick Ringgenberg, *L'univers symbolique des arts islamiques*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2009, p. 367-368.

<sup>7</sup> Patrick Ringgenberg, *L'univers symbolique des arts islamiques*, p. 57-143.

According to a famous hadith, God was a hidden treasure who wanted to be known and who created the world so that he would be known. It means that the universe, with all its ornaments (stars in the sky, animals and plants on the earth), is a self-disclosure of God's hidden beauty and knowledge. In other words, the cosmic ornaments are signs (âyat) of God.<sup>8</sup> Their beauty testifies to the Divine Beauty, and their design and function manifest what God desired to share and say about Himself and about the world He created.

Although human art cannot compete with Divine Creativity, artifacts or architectural ornamentation may also convey a symbolic message and transmit a sparkle from a transient beauty. To adorn is to create beauty, to add brightness and intelligibility to a building or to an object: it is a form of tribute to Divine Beauty, the absolute source of all manifested beauty. Therefore the beauty of any decoration may be perceived, not only as a source of sensual pleasure, but also in a Platonic or Sufi perspective as a visible reflection of the Invisible. The subjective or objective qualities of the decorations (clarity, stability, order, harmony, geometry, etc.) can be interpreted on different hermeneutic levels, and ultimately as a mirror of Divine Attributes and Qualities, which are the eternal origin of the world's coherence, meaning, and unity. It is certainly meaningful that the Qur'an mentions ornate works of art in the context of paradisiacal rewards and pleasures: the believers in the hereafter will wear garments of fine silk and brocade (Qur'an 18:31), they will have cushions and carpets (Qur'an 88:15-16), and vessels of silver and goblets of crystal will be passed round them (Qur'an 76:15). Even interpreted in a metaphorical way, these verses clearly show that beauty is a gift of God's generosity and a sign of paradise. Human made ornaments are thus rooted in a paradisiacal archetype. The heavenly gardens give peace, enlighten the eyes, and delight the hearts: so do the ornaments on earth, prefiguring at their modest level and in a perishable way the immutable pleasures and beauty of paradise.

One can even delve deeper into the metaphysical roots of the desire and power to adorn. The Islamic concept of the 99 Divine Names gives us a clue to trace in God the origin of what we call "ornamentation". These names may be found in the Qur'an and in the hadith, and although there is no definite consensus about the listing of these names, they represent a fundamental philosophical concept. The 99 names symbolize God's attributes or modes of action that can be understood by human consciousness. According to Sufis like Ibn Arabî the Divine Names are God's ornaments, because they are ontological self-expressions of God.<sup>9</sup> The absolute Unity, the Divine transcendence, is void of any ornamentation, in as much as Divinity is beyond imagination, conceptualization, and intellection. God's oneness is unornamented, because He is unconditioned and there is nothing comparable to Him. The Divine Names are the Qualities that God himself can disclose in order to radiate intelligible features of His indescribable essence.

We can thus evoke a metaphysical procession in terms of ornamentation:

<sup>8</sup> See The Holy Qur'an 6:99; 13:2; 13:17; 12:105; 30:20-22.

<sup>9</sup> Henry Corbin, *L'imagination créatrice dans le soufisme d'Ibn Arabi*, Paris, Flammarion, 1958, p. 240.



- » The Divine Unity is the “non-adorned God”, beyond any qualification, expression, understanding, meditation.
- » Out of His self-intellection, the supreme Unity adorns Himself with 99 Names, which reveal on a Divine level what God wishes to express about His Infinity.
- » The Divine Intellect, rich of all these Names, creates the entire universe – angels, paradises, skies, earth – whose qualities are woven with and by the Divine Names.

In other words, ornament as beautification and as sign is the result of a metaphysical and cosmological process. God adorns Himself with Names and these Names are archetypes of beauty as well as symbols of an unknowable reality: the most beautiful names belong to God (Qur'an 7:180; 17:110) and these names are perennial expressions of Divine self-knowledge and radiant creativity. Therefore the cosmic ornaments – the stars in the sky or the vegetation on the earth – are a beautification of the world as well as signs to decipher and to meditate upon.

From a metaphysical perspective, the art of ornamentation and the very concept of ornament reflect the mystery of Existence and God's self-exteriorization. As a radiating beautified sign, ornament derives from the mysterious emanation of Divine Names which adorn the transcendental Unity and determine the cosmic qualities of the entire universe. The capacity of men to adorn reveals once again the excellence of Man. As caliphs of God on earth men have been granted the gift of creativity. The human art of ornamentation, insofar as it is qualitative and meaningful, is a symbol of the essential function of Man who, at the center of an ornate universe, is the mirror to the Divine Names, and whose very existence is rooted in the supreme Unity – the God beyond “ornament”.

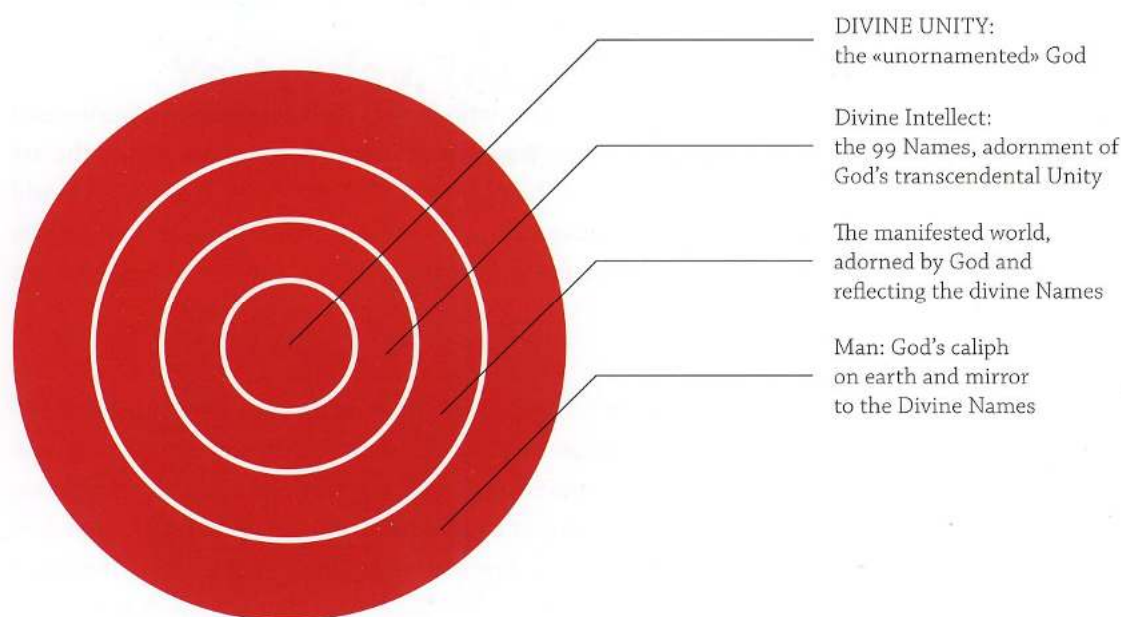
One may think that the above speculations about metaphysics of ornament are strictly modern and inspired by contemporary phenomenological or traditionalist approaches to Islamic arts. It is partly true, but a few historical texts may reveal that these concepts were also present before modern times, at least to a certain extent and in certain artistic milieus. A preface by the historian Khwândamir to an album made by Kamâluddîn Behzâd (beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century) evokes in a poetic way the decoration of the world by the Divine Painter and the preeminence of Man adorned with arts and crafts:

When the painter of eternity portrayed the sun, he adorned an album with leaves of the celestial sphere.

Therein he depicted without color or brush many bright-cheeked beauties.

When the perfect will of the unquestionable Omnipotent and the all-inclusive desire of the Creator who says “Be!” and a thing is came to bring into existence the forms of this ever-changing workshop, the portraitist of eternal favor depicted with the pen of Divine favor the human “album” in the best form in accordance with the Quranic verse, “He formed you and made your





7. The main ontological levels of the Universe

forms beautiful” [Qur’an 40:64], and in accordance with the noble words, “We have preferred them before many of our creatures which we have created” [Qur’an 17:70], he preferred this group, whose qualities were approved, over most creatures by giving them the adornment of various types of rare knowledge and the ornament of unique crafts.<sup>10</sup>

## Conclusion

In light of the Muslim worldview, the art of ornamentation appears far from being “decorative” in the restrictive or even pejorative sense of the term. Apart from its social or political meaning and influence, more or less particular and historically defined, decoration and the desire to adorn are, in a much broader sense, an expression of the cosmic vocation of Man, the visibility of a Muslim humanity, a human mirror to the cosmos, a potential or multidimensional sign to decipher, a prefiguration of paradise, a testimony to the manifestable beauty of God.

These are the perennial values of ornament: they do not belong to a bygone age; they are the substance of our human condition. The preservation of arts and crafts in the contemporary Islamic world is a necessity, but economic reasons, however important they may be, should not be the sole motivation. To decorate objects and buildings in an industrial, westernized, and post-modern world must not merely be a superficial perpetuation or “revival” of the past, but

<sup>10</sup> Wheeler M. Thackston, *Album Prefaces and Other Documents on the History of Calligraphers and Painters*, Leiden, Brill, 2001, p. 41.



should be a connection or a deep-rootedness to an unchanging and unchangeable worldview and humanism.

A 20<sup>th</sup> century French poet wrote that the countries who forgot their legends are condemned to freeze to death.<sup>11</sup> We could paraphrase this sentence by saying that countries losing the art of adorning life and arts will sooner or later lose their identity and very "raison d'être". A world without ornament is no longer a world for human beings: to preserve traditional arts and crafts is not a question of nostalgia but a matter of life, a humanistic duty, and a challenge for our common future.

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<sup>11</sup> Patrice de La Tour du Pin, « Tous les pays qui n'ont plus de légende / Seront condamnés à mourir de froid » (*Une somme de poésie*, livre V, prélude de *La quête de joie*).